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**A Dark Dionysus:
The transformation of a Greek god between the Bronze and Iron
Age**

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Abstract

Dionysus was thought until recently to be a foreign god in the Greek pantheon; a result of trade contacts with Thrace and Phrygia, a late acquirement connected with the renewed prosperity of Greece after the “Dark Age.” According to the classical myth, he was just another illicit son of Zeus. He presided over frenzy, drunkenness, wilderness and everything concerning the chaotic forces of nature. But why was his name already in the Mycenaean pantheon? Why did the Orphics know a completely different myth and his name was found accompanying the dead? New studies seem to challenge the classical image of a tipsy Bacchus and lead us to a different, darker and more ancient scenario, helping us to shed some light on a still unclear prehistory of Greek religion.

The mystery of the twice-born Dionysus

The Linear B tablets of Pylos and Knossos allowed us to compile a list of gods and goddesses easily comparable to those appearing in the Classical Greek pantheon.¹ Only one thing is alarming: Hades, god and ruler of the underworld, is not in the list. Did the Mycenaeans not have any eschatology? The grandeur of their tombs would deny this assumption without further ado, but even by looking at the Linear B list of deities we have clear trace of chthonian goddesses like the Erinyes (*E-ri-nu-we*) and Persephone (*Pe-re-se-wa*).² The absence of Hades goes together with the presence of a god who was long believed to be a later and foreign acquirement to the Greeks: Dionysus. In the tablets from Pylos Dionysus can be identified in the syllabic form *Di-wo-ni-so-jo*.³ Since the Linear B texts just recorded the offerings to the gods, without providing any story about them, our knowledge of the Mycenaean divine sphere remains lacking. We can envisage the function of the BA gods only by comparison with their later counterparts, although not always fitting.

In fact, proceeding by comparison, we would see a Mycenaean society worshipping a god of wine and frenzy and ignoring a male god of the underworld, which is somehow challenging to believe. Perhaps, the answer to this enigma can be found in the few clues present in the Orphic mystery cults, where a darker Dionysus, far from the image of a young god, son of Semele, born from the thigh of Zeus after his mother's death, appears. The connection between Dionysus and the poet Orpheus was not new to the ancient sources. Diodorus says that Dionysus, who during his wanderings had reached Thrace, had taught to king Tharops his mysteries. Tharops passed the doctrine to his son Oeagrus and he did the same in turn. Oeagrus' son was the poet Orpheus.⁴ Orpheus' legendary life, going back to a pre-Homeric age imbued with mysticism and poetry, was said to have been devoted to many philosophical endeavours. As hinted by Plato⁵ and told by many others until the time

¹ See Ventris, Chadwick 1959.

² Ventris, Chadwick 1959: no. 316.

³ Ventris, Chadwick 1959: no. 172.

⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, III 65.6.

⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, 179d.

of Ovid,⁶ he had entered the reign of Hades alive and he had reached the thrones of Plouton and Persephone. He had come back still alive from the underworld and his scripts (usually in forms of hymns and formulae) on the chthonian deities were still celebrated in the archaic world,⁷ as postulated also by the fake Orphic texts looking for popularity in the 5th century, inciting the experts' indignation.⁸ In other words, he was an authority on eschatology, and his texts, if considered authentic, were probably read during the mystery rites of Dionysus and learnt by the initiates to acquire power over death, and happiness in the underworld.⁹

That said, what was usually linked to Orpheus and acquired the designation of 'Orphic', was usually an underground mythology in which the secrets of Dionysus were told, secrets influential to humanity as well. Mostly unknown to the commoners, the initiates' myth about Dionysus had more to do with a different deity than a variant of the same. Unlike the widespread myth of Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, celebrated by both early poems¹⁰ and late sources;¹¹ the chthonian counterpart of the god plays his role in a very different story, not found in any earlier epic. This version, previously suggested by fragmentary and often hardly understandable passages of various poems and hymns, is today clearer to us, thanks to the discovery of the *Derveni Papyrus*.¹² In the papyrus is told that Kronos' wife, Rhea (Zeus' mother, here syncretised with another mystery figure, Demeter), hid Zeus in a Cretan cave so that he would not be eaten by his father, and there, mating with Zeus himself, she gave birth to a daughter: Persephone. The latter became the god's consort and generated a first, horned, Dionysus, in some cases called Zagreus.¹³ He was destined to rule the Cosmos after his father Zeus, but the Titans, jealous of his power, kidnapped the child and tore his body apart, cooking and eating his flesh. Several variants of what happened at this point of the story lead to a concomitant variety of interpretations, but one in particular is crucial.

⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X.

⁷ Of which we have today 87 scripts dating to the 1st/2nd century CE, published as *Orphic Hymns*.

⁸ Plato, *Meno*, 81a.

⁹ Johnston 2007c: 177.

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 940 – 942; *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, II 21.

¹¹ Apollodorus, *Library*, III 4.3.

¹² Cfr. the text in Kouremenos, Parassoglou, Tsantsanoglou 2006.

¹³ Nonnus of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca*, VI.

The source is Olympiodorus the Younger, belonging to the Platonic school and to the Alexandrine and Byzantine cultural environments. He is a late author (6th century CE), but gives an interpretation of Plato's *Phaedo* which shows a good knowledge of the Orphic tradition. In his work Olympiodorus explains the obscure meaning of Plato's passage: "What is said of this matter in the mysteries."¹⁴ According to the philosopher, Plato is alluding to an Orphic lost script in which the abovementioned myth was told in a more detailed form, mentioning a distant past where four cosmic reigns had succeeded one after the other: the reign of Uranus, Kronos, Zeus and Dionysus. Before Dionysus' kingdom came, the Titans murdered the child and, after having lured him away from his keepers with toys, they dismembered, roasted and ate him. Once the infamy was discovered by Zeus, he incinerated the Titans with his thunderbolts. The godly matter composed by the brutal titanic and the pure divine natures generated the human race, the members of which possess indeed both qualities.¹⁵

Now, a certain neo-platonic view is detectable. But we cannot discharge the story so easily. On the one hand, the myth could be influenced by Olympiodorus' doctrine, but, making an effort to identify the Orphic material only, it appears to be very important for our matter. Graf attributes the story to around the 6th century BCE,¹⁶ basing this inference mostly on the fact that the version is completely absent from earlier epic poems and on wide currency by the 5th and 4th centuries as shown by many ancient quotations.¹⁷ Moreover, Pausania tells us that Onomacritus, the 6th century BCE oracle-maker, composed rituals for Dionysus, including a story about the Titans.¹⁸ So Olympiodorus' account can still be taken into consideration as a possible Orphic creation myth, which is part of his erudition rather than a neoplatonic parable.

In all these versions, however, Dionysus dies, participating to the journey into the chthonian realm. Greek mysteries, where this myth might have been read, were

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, XXIII. 2.

¹⁵ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Phaedo*, I. 3.

¹⁶ Johnston 2007a: 69,70.

¹⁷ *Exempli gratia*: Pindar, fragment 133.

¹⁸ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VIII, 37.5.

fundamentally a personal choice of the believer, who decided to shift his faith from a common and public dimension to a selected and private one, expecting a gain of some sort, as reminded by Cicero's saying that at Eleusis (hometown of the highly famous Demeter's mysteries) people were shown how to die with better hopes.¹⁹ As Burkert points out, mystery cults provided two main rewards: cures and immunisations for this life and guarantees of bliss after death.²⁰ Dionysian mysteries are not incompatible with this theory. In fact the Orphic myth of Dionysus puts human nature in a double-featured existence and connects it to a more complex vision of the afterlife.

Mysteries probably symbolised a spiritual training which gave the initiates the status and knowledge necessary to reach that precise area of the underworld where bliss was acquired. It is a sort of apotropaic magic, a ritual to prepare the soul for her ineluctable journey. If we look at some frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, which extraordinarily preserved several scenes of mystery rites in the act of being performed,²¹ that during the initiation ceremony something was read. According to Herodotus, indeed, mysteries were supposed to have a *hieros logos*, a sacred tale.²²

We lost the content of these tales, could the tale read during the Orphic Mysteries be that of the slain Dionysus? The story itself is probably not the central revelation of the mystery, but it helped the initiate to sympathize with a dimension of sufferance and final relief, firstly experienced by the god, in order to induce a catharsis and renew faith into an exclusive afterlife.²³ The figure of Dionysus killed by the Titans and generating with them humanity lays the basics of men's redemption, promising salvation for those who purify themselves from the titanic brutality of their natures. Seaford points out that Dionysus acted like a conjunction ring between this world and

¹⁹ Cicero, *On the laws*, II, 36.

²⁰ Burkert 1987: 23.

²¹ For the relative iconographic material see Sauron 2010.

²² Herodotus, II, 51.

²³ Burkert 1987: 74.

the next, releasing his followers from sufferance in both, he was the most similar to men and he knew death.²⁴

There is clear attempt to disengage a mystery cult from geographical boundaries and cities: the story of the slain godchild does not specify any particular human place in which the murder was perpetrated; this made it suitable for a widespread worshipping unrelated to the prestige of individual cities, such as Eleusis, and released the faithful from any pilgrimage. Moreover this translocal nature of the myth gives it an ecumenical value, with itinerant priests travelling all over the Greek-cultured countries and promoting their doctrine with no limits.²⁵

The whole myth is presented as a flawed sacrifice, the Titans dismember and cook Dionysus as if he were an animal. This generates a blame (for both the Titans and their descendents), a corruption, a sort of original sin that was the cause of human suffering. The story then was managed to fit the pre-existing epic, explaining exactly how the fifth race of the humans came to existence, an episode on which Hesiod had not given any clue.²⁶ Yet it clearly linked human mortality with Dionysus' claim to be both a conqueror of death and an eschatological figure destined to redeem men in the afterlife.²⁷ As such, the possibility that the Mycenaean Dionysus (dying and ruling over the dead like a Greek Osiris)²⁸ was in fact a chthonian god representing the original ruler of the underworld becomes quite plausible.

Unsurprisingly, the chthonic implications of the Dionysian festival of the Anthesteria, which took place in the polis-based Greece emerging from the EIA, consisted of three days, each bearing the name of a ceramic vessel: *Pithoigia*, "The jar opening", *Choai*, "The jugs", and *Khytroi* "The water jugs". It was supposed to be a celebration for the opening of the jars containing new wine, and wine was indeed one of the

²⁴ Seaford 2006: 84.

²⁵ Seaford 2006: 86.

²⁶ Hesiod, *Works and days*, II 179-200.

²⁷ Johnston 2007a: 88-92.

²⁸ The myth is fragmentary in both the *Pyramid Texts* (spells 218, 364, 477, 532) and in the *Great Hymn to Osiris* carved on the 18th dynasty stele of Amenmose, our best witness remains the late story written by Plutarch, *Moralia*, V.24.

essentials of the festival.²⁹ But in this case, it was not intended as a beverage for human enjoyment only: on *Pithoigia*, the god Dionysus was said to have reached Athens on a black (pitched) ship,³⁰ coming from a sea that in Homer was indeed wine-dark. Harrison connected indeed the *pithoi* which named the first day with the archaic practice of *enchytrismos* that implied the dead or their cremated remains to be buried inside *pithoi* (due to their big size and large mouth).³¹ Thus, if we think of the Dionysian myth, we could intend wine as a divine underworld liquid that came out from burial places and brought pollution to the living, unless purified by appropriate rites. On the second day, *Choai*, the souls of the dead were deemed to be free to roam along the city streets and, to avoid their pollution, the temples remained closed and people chewed blackthorn as a protection against ghosts, anointing their house doors with pitch for the same reason.³² On the third day the ghosts were guided back to their realm by another chthonian figure, Hermes Psychopompos, to whom a soup (in deep bowls?) of all the pulses available (*panspermia*), was prepared for feeding the dead before their re-descent into Hades.³³ There is no religious festival known to us in the transition between the LBA and the EIA which can relate to Anthesteria. But it is also true that we do not have enough data about the rituals connected to the dead occurring in those periods, apart from the mourning and the procession to the grave rarely shown by vases. If not as the very same festival, at least as a ritual holding the same nucleus of beliefs, Anthesteria could have well occurred before. The Dionysus proposed by the festival is after all an ancestral and unusual one, quite anachronistic in classical times. He must have been recalled by older traditions.

It is also incorrect to state that there are no burial practices during the transition to the Greek EIA which can relate to this tradition. In fact the cultic value of wine as a liquid linked to the realm of the dead and to the ancestral Dionysus appears even more evident if we recall the fact that in the Greek afterlife the souls are said to be thirsty,³⁴ and as soon as they drink from the river Lethe, they lose also their memory.

²⁹ Parker 2005: 296.

³⁰ Hermippus, *The basket-bearers*, fr. 63.

³¹ Harrison 1991: 47.

³² Photius, fr. M 439.

³³ Parker 2005: 294, 295.

³⁴ This connection between thirsty souls and vessels in tombs had already been introduced by Immerwahr 1971: 105, Vermeule 1979: 57 and recently discussed in detail by Gallou 2005: 276-286.

Odysseus had to sacrifice a goat to be able to talk to them, because only by drinking blood the spirits of the dead could apparently reacquire their strength and wits.³⁵ Moreover, wine and blood can share the same colour, and the power of the beverage to affect one's wits was not a mystery. Therefore, an acceptable theory about the function of the drinking vessels offered in tombs might individuate them as ritual provision of wine as a mock-blood, either to supply the perennial thirst of the dead in the underworld or to keep them with enough 'wits' to avoid the dangers of their mysterious journey in the underworld.

Of course, in this case, the more wine containers available (especially within reused tombs) in a burial place, the longer the beneficial effects on the dead. This initial belief, proper of the Mycenaean and LH IIIC periods, might have faded during the PG, when cremation included a different and more direct way to reach the final destination. Therefore Dionysus did have a recognized connection with the underworld, even outside the Orphic circle. This is the message hidden in the Anthesteria: the original Dionysus was very close to the one described by the aforementioned *Derveni papyrus*.

The golden instructions of Dionysus

Together with some far and very simply incised 5th century bone plaques found in 1951 in the Greek colony of Olbia (Ukraine),³⁶ bearing both the names of Dionysus and the Orphics, the golden leaves of the dead are an ulterior and more exhaustive clue for our reconstruction. They are grave goods found in several burial sites of the 4th and 3rd century BCE Greece, at Pharsalos (Thessaly), Eleutherna and Sfakaki (Crete), Hipponion and Petelia (Greater Greece) and all of them give back a complete text.³⁷

These objects were found laying on the chest of the dead, in some cases covering their mouths. What is the message they carried? The standardised formula, which is the same (with small variants and abbreviations) in all the geographical areas in

³⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, v. 135 ff.

³⁶ The texts are now published in the *OF* 463, 464, 465, see Rusyaeva 1978: 87-104.

³⁷ Also reported in *OF* 32.

which such golden leaves were discovered, appears to convey instructions to orientate the dead souls within the chthonian regions, reaching the realm of bliss. Let us analyze one of the longest texts, from Magna Graecia; the leaf reads as follows:³⁸

“This is the work of memory when you are about to die
Down to the well built house of Hades. There is a spring at the right side
And standing by it a white cypress.
Descending to it, the souls of the dead refresh themselves.
Do not even go near this spring!
Ahead you will find from the lake of memory,
Cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it.
They will ask you with astute wisdom,
What you are seeking in the darkness of murky Hades,
Say “I am son of Earth and Starry Sky
I am parched with thirst and I am dying; but quickly grant me
Cold water from the lake of memory to drink”
And they will announce you to the Chthonian King
And they will grant you to drink from the lake of memory
And you too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road on which other
Glorious initiates and bacchoi travel.”³⁹

According to Cole, the underworld had assumed during the Archaic age traits similar to the human one; with a proper geography and social stratifications no longer connected with prestige, but with behavior during life.⁴⁰ These lines were then meant for initiates in the Bacchic mysteries and make us acquainted with a precise map of a multidimensional underworld. Tartaros was the underworld region in which

³⁸ Translated by Graf in Graf, Johnston 2007.

³⁹ OF, 487.

⁴⁰ Cole 2003: 193.

misbehaving gods and people were punished, Elysium was the region of bliss. And in-between was an empty region where dead souls roamed with no memory or strength.⁴¹ It is important to notice that 5th and 4th century BCE Greek literature always refers to Hades as a kingdom and not as a god; the same applies to the name Plouton, possibly an epithet for Hades.⁴² Whatever the truth behind the chthonian ruler, it is also true that Dionysus is never mentioned directly as such. A chthonian king is mentioned in the golden leaf mentioned above, but with no name. If the mention of the bacchoi initiates is not a crucial proof, it still allows us to infer that, if the golden leaves had an Orphic connection, the chthonian king could have been Dionysus.

As already explained, in Greek afterlife the souls are said to be thirsty, and as soon as they drank from the Lethe they also lose their memories. In the golden leaves the dead are thirsty as well, but the formula they have learnt suggests them how to proceed: the first spring they find, marked by a white cypress, is Lethe. Its water provokes oblivion so that its incautious drinker can no longer find the path to beatitude. We could say he/she cannot live a new life. But the initiate knows what to do and proceeds towards the second spring, Mnemosyne, whose waters leave memories unaffected. However, two guardians will try to hinder him with questions about his presence there. The initiate then was supposed to say: "I am the son of Earth and Starry Sky" and the guardians would let him pass and reach the final stage of his journey.

Now, this instructions were maybe what a fragment of Aristotle says to be the secret and exclusive knowledge that set initiates apart from normal people:⁴³ "cheats", as Cole calls them, to overcome Hades' regulations.⁴⁴ As Burkert points out, the passage stating a kinship between the initiate and the starry sky is part of the revelation of the mystery, a generation myth seeing men in a sort of communion with the gods.⁴⁵ It implies the discovery of a story in which man descended from the gods.

⁴¹ Garland 2011: 52.

⁴² Garland 2011: 52.

⁴³ *Aristotelis Qui Ferebantur Librorum Fragmenta*, fr. 15.

⁴⁴ Cole 2003: 208.

⁴⁵ Burkert 1987: 77.

It would be more sensible then to allow a Mycenaean god of the underworld to manage also the superintendence of a cultic beverage like wine, a liquid as coloured as the waters of the underworld and which had the power to alter the state of one's mind. This is perhaps the reason why somewhere in the EIA the separation between Hades and Dionysus occurred, assigning the powers of wine to another god who later syncretised with the name of Dionysus, not bringing with him the funerary side of it.

Hades and Dionysus

Some, like Miller, have already described the psychological and philosophical meanings of the interdependence between Hades and Dionysus expressed in the classical period.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this paper would like to imply a deeper syncretism. The Mycenaean pantheon included Dionysus, and we have exposed the tale circulating in the mystery cults of the classical period, fostering the subterranean belief about the existence of a complex eschatology in which human beings, descending from both a god and the titans, inherited the divine nature allowing them to safely cross the realm of the dead. This Orphic Dionysus was born twice as well! The fact Hesiod does not mention this version is a hard obstacle to our reconnection of the myth to the EIA and even more to the original role of Dionysus in the BA. And yet epigraphic documents like the 7th century bone plaques in the Milesian colony of Olbia, in the Black Sea, already offer a connection between Dionysus and the Orphics. The golden leaves in the Greek burials confirm the role of Dionysus in bridging this life and the other, suggesting that he was also responsible for the dead.

Eraclitus had stated in a well-known fragment that Hades and Dionysus were one and the same.⁴⁷ In fact Hades (Greek *Ἅιδης*) just meant “the invisible”, and always occurred in Homer in genitive case, “of Hades”, “of the invisible [realm]”. It later became an epithet of the god, together with many others: Plouton, “the wealthy one”; Polydectes, “the receiver of many”; Clymenus, “the illustrious”, and Eubulos “the good advisor”, the latter also including Dionysus, defined as Eubuleus in the

⁴⁶ Miller 1978.

⁴⁷ “...ὡς τὸς δὲ Ἅιδης καὶ Διόνυσος” Eraclitus, fr. 15DK.

Orphic Hymns.⁴⁸ What if among all these epithets even Hades were just a nickname? The homonymy between the god and the place must have occurred somewhere in the EIA, during the complex transformations taking place in the Aegean. Somehow we may infer that new commercial and colonial contacts during the Geometric period (perhaps earlier, judging by Semele's presence in Hesiod's poem), started to provide some Greek communities new gods, who attracted Dionysus into their own religious sphere, according to his several powers and symbols.

Perhaps at this point Iakkos (Bacchus), whose name is often attributed to Dionysus (who runs the bacchanals), starts now to draw the original god of the dead into his dimension of frenzy and divine madness which will remain attached to the god from the Archaic period onwards. In this perspective, however provocative, the story so far would propose a Mycenaean Dionysus who was the god of the underworld and during the transition between the LBA and the EIA was separated in two different cults. One assimilated to the Eleusinian 'Iakkos' and the other, closer to the original, kept alive by the Orphic mysteries and hidden by the nickname of Hades. The second is not invisible in Greek society, I have pointed out its presence in the Anthesteria where he unleashes the dead on earth for three days. And I have shown mention of Dionysus, the Orphic and Bacchic initiates in the bone plaques of the Black Sea and several funerary golden leaves found in Greece and Southern Italy.

Conclusions

Both historically and archaeologically there are undeniable signs of a different cult of the god Dionysus in the Archaic and Classical periods. The tale exposed by the *Derveni papyrus* tells of a Dionysus who is son of Zeus and Persephone, killed by the Titans and ruling the other world as a god of the dead. His physical remains gave birth to humanity, which is therefore divine and as such can count on Dionysus to reach bliss after death. This story was probably read during the Orphic mystery cults and kept alive by their initiates. It can be detected in some formulae written on plaques and golden leaves providing the way to escape the dangers of the kingdom of Hades.

⁴⁸ Orphic Hymns, XXX, 1-3, 6,7.

All leads us to think that Dionysus, whose name appears in a Linear B text, could have been before the EIA an ancient god of the dead, later syncretised with the god Lakkos and turned into the god of frenzy and wine, while his chthonian version was assimilated with the name of the underworld itself, thus becoming Hades. Whatever the events behind the evolution of this ambivalent character may turn out to be, more studies on Dionysus' funerary connection will most likely help clarify the function that the Mycenaean pantheon had for the early Greek society.

Chronology Acronyms

BA: Bronze Age.

EBA: Early Bronze Age.

EIA: Early Iron Age.

LBA: Late Bronze Age.

LH: Late Helladic.

Journal Abbreviations

BAR: British Archaeological Reports, Oxford, 1974.

CAF : *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, Leipzig, 1880.

DK: Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Wiesbaden-Biebrich/Nassau, 1848.

IG: *Inscriptiones Graecae*, Berlin, 1873.

FrHG: *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, Paris, 1849.

JAAR: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Oxford, 1933.

JHS: *Journal of Hellenic Studies* Cambridge, 1880.

OF: *Orphicorum Fragmenta* Berlin, 1922.

SEG : *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Leiden, 1923.

Suda: Bekker, A.I. (ed), *Suidae Lexicon: ex recognitione Immanuelis Bekkeri*, Berlin, 1854.

ZPE: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Köln, 1967.

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